

5 Takeaways - Maximize Clinical Resources Using Telehealth

The COVID-19 pandemic and patient preferences for more digital, accessible, and convenient healthcare continue to drive momentum for telehealth — and organizations are responding by expanding their telehealth capabilities.

During a June advisory call sponsored by Amwell and hosted by Becker's Hospital Review, telehealth leaders discussed the positive effects telehealth adoption has had thus far and what healthcare organizations must do to ensure continued advances in the future. Participants included:

- Hoy Garvin, executive director of on-demand care and network telehealth, Community Health Network (Indianapolis)
- Airica Steed, EdD, RN, system chief operating officer, executive vice president and interim president, Mount Sinai Hospital (Chicago)
- Brian Wayling, executive director, technology and development, Intermountain Connect (Salt Lake City)
- The director of telehealth for a nonprofit health system in the Appalachian region

Five takeaways:


1. COVID-19 forced providers to increase and expand their use of telehealth. Most healthcare providers that had begun using telehealth prior to the pandemic were using it on a limited basis, such as for virtual visits primarily in acute care and behavioral health. But because the COVID-19 crisis restricted patients' physical access to care, many providers were pushed to extend their use of telehealth to other service lines. Hospitals and health systems began offering telehealth modalities for primary and specialty care, chronic care, on-demand urgent care and teleSitter programs.

2. The consumer and digital transformations occurring within healthcare are driving providers to embrace a digital-first mindset. Along with expanding telehealth use cases, trends within healthcare include a dramatic increase in consumerization and increased use of digital technologies for multiple purposes to increase efficiency, productivity, clinical care, and the consumer experience.

An important and growing use of technology, where telehealth plays a key role, is the digital front door. "As we continue in our digital-first mindset shift, the pandemic has propelled us light years ahead of where we would have been had we not had the urgency to rapidly adopt telehealth in whatever way was comfortable," said Mr. Garvin.

"Now that we're on the other side of the last two years, we're embracing telehealth for innovation and patient-centeredness," said Dr. Steed. "Telehealth is also a strong contender on the population health side."

3. Telehealth can help mitigate staffing shortages and maximize patient access. Staffing shortages that predated COVID-19 have been exacerbated by the pandemic, especially a critical nurse shortage. This shortage is impacting crucial elements of care delivery, such as patient access to care, bed availability within hospitals, and access to other services. By integrating telehealth modalities, healthcare organizations can mitigate some of those impacts, for example, by using virtual care to extend resources to communities where brick-and-mortar healthcare sites or specialty care are scarce.



Another way that telehealth can help address staffing shortages is by providing education and training to newly recruited and less experienced clinicians, nurses, and other staff members. “What we’ve been seeing with our telehealth capabilities is augmentation and knowledge growth to give those individuals on-the-job mentoring and help with difficult situations and questions,” said Mr. Wayling. “It’s a little bit like an Ask-a-Nurse [hotline] but in real time.”

Assembling telehealth panel-based compensation for providers within primary care, such that virtual visits can be staffed by dietitians, pharmacists, and other nonphysician professionals, is another use case. Because they involve a physician only when absolutely required, such panels increase clinicians’ patient coverage, thereby reducing clinician-to-patient ratios. “If we continue to think of telehealth visits in terms of relative value units and one-on-one visits, we’re never going to get there,” said Mr. Garvin. He noted that this arrangement also allows providers to optimize their work schedules by stacking some days with higher-revenue sick visits while others with panel-based visits.

- 4. To drive telehealth adoption, the technology must be stable, efficient, and frictionless.** Resistance to telehealth still persists among some clinicians, but this resistance can be overcome if the technology works reliably, integrates well into existing clinical workflows, enables smooth handoffs between care team members and patients, and is so user-friendly as to seem invisible behind the scenes.

Organizations can further encourage and support adoption by ensuring telehealth services are available in different languages and by providing the technological knowledge and literacy that may be needed by both patients and physicians. “No one wants to feel incompetent or inadequate, and if someone feels this way about a new piece of equipment we’re trying to implement, they’re less likely to use it,” said the director of telehealth for the Appalachian health system.

- 5. In the future, healthcare will seamlessly integrate and blend together both physical/in-person and virtual/digital care.** The vision for the future is that telehealth will become seamlessly integrated into what simply becomes a standard part of delivering healthcare services. As this occurs, the distinction between in-person and virtual care will become obsolete. This will simply be how healthcare is delivered.

Advisory call participants highlighted four ways that they expect telehealth to become seamlessly integrated into holistic healthcare delivery models that benefit patients:

- Incorporation of telehealth reaffirms providers’ commitment to patient centricity: Increasingly, patients want health services to be delivered digitally and conveniently, when it is safe to do so. With the embedding of predictive technologies within telehealth modalities, the expectation is this will also make healthcare more personalized.
- Incorporation of telehealth can help attract and retain clinicians: A growing number of clinicians — when considering employment at a provider — are inquiring about whether a healthcare organization incorporates telehealth capabilities in delivering care. That’s because many clinicians see advantages in and have preferences for telehealth and want to work in a forward-thinking organization. Telehealth is seen as a tool that amplifies clinicians’ reach by extending services that do not require a brick-and-mortar environment into patients’ homes.
- Incorporation of telehealth can increase provider collaboration, remove barriers to care and improve health equity: This is a natural benefit of the digital tools and technologies that make telehealth possible in the first place. It decreases the separation and silos that existing within healthcare and increases the integration and cohesion. Virtual visits reduce the need for patients to travel and reduce no-shows, which positively affects providers’ revenue loss.

“Across the board, I’m extremely pleased with the way in which the industry has seemed to assimilate adopting various digital health telehealth strategies,” said Dr. Steed. “However, we’re still building the plane and flying at the same time.”

The pandemic has shown what is possible by integrating telehealth as a part of healthcare delivery. While barriers still exist, the future is about integrating telehealth into the normal delivery of care — with many benefits resulting from this evolution.